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## Citizenship education in divided societies: teachers' perspectives in Northern Ireland

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This article aimed to investigate in what ways teachers' developing understandings of citizenship education in a divided society reflect discourses around national citizenship and controversial issues. Based on thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with 13 post-primary teachers in Northern Ireland undertaking an in-service programme in citizenship, findings indicate that the controversial nature of past conflict maintains its sensitivity in the educational context though other categories of potential exclusion, such as race and sexuality, compete for space in educational discourse and teaching. Few teachers used controversial issues identified as challenging hegemonic beliefs as an opportunity for role modelling citizenship. However, teachers rarely explored the complex interlinkages between traditional and alternative categories of exclusion. It is argued that this may render teachers' understandings of citizenship and societal conflict disconnected, which in turn may hinder the potential for citizenship education to address societal divisions and to promote active peace in the long term.

**Keywords:** citizenship education; divided societies; controversial issues

### Introduction

Citizenship education has long raised concerns about its potential to indoctrinate pupils, to forge a national identity and thus to override minority groups' cultures, values and uniqueness (Faulks 2006). With the depreciating meaning of national identity, public attention thus turned to the search of a set of values, such as equality, justice and human rights, which could provide the 'glue' that holds society together. For example, approaches that are based on the notion of a critical multiculturalism (May 1999) assume that citizenship education should be rooted in human rights and emphasise the power of political discourse in tackling controversial issues to instill respect for diversity. Osler and Starkey (2000) suggest a multicultural approach to citizenship education, which acknowledges and challenges differences and inequalities between social groups and which requires a rethinking of national identity to be truly inclusive. Similarly, Banks (2008) proposes a transformative approach to citizenship education, which enables pupils to experience diversity as well as to explore their identities in their shared daily school life.

While there is some consensus that citizenship education could, in theory, address multiple identities as well as societal divisions and conflict, its national connotations, as well

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as the frequent invisibility of these controversial issues in policies, curricula and/or practice (Osler and Starkey 2006) have led to some doubts and criticisms. Especially in the context of education in traditionally divided societies, where the majority of the population identified with different cultural/ethnic and/or racial groups which are perceived as exclusive and often aligned with opposing political views, McAndrew (2002, p. 2) warns that divisions raise 'specific challenges regarding the emergence of a shared citizenship as well as in the area of education'. Indeed, in divided societies where citizenship and identity, government structures and politics itself are contested issues, citizenship education needs to be implemented carefully to ensure that it alleviates rather than aggravates community relations (Smith 2003). If citizenship education in divided societies thus incorporates education for democracy and peace (Larkin 2001), learning involving emotions and empathy, which enables pupils to share their hurt and to learn to understand 'the other' perspective, might be even more crucial to its successful implementation (Salomon 2004). However, societal divisions in these contexts are often reflected in separate schooling, where pupils do not experience shared learning and the perspective of the 'other' so that the development of understanding and empathy relies on the curriculum and teachers' ability to deliver it. A further complication is that teachers' own views have been shaped by their respective communities, and if this is unrecognised and unchallenged, it might be transferred to pupils and thus perpetuate community divisions (Weinstein *et al.* 2007). Additionally, for citizenship education to be inclusive in societies with a history of conflict, an emphasis on these traditional frontiers needs to be carefully balanced with a focus on other social divisions, e.g. relating to other cultural groups, social class and gender. As such, teachers' understandings of citizenship education and controversial issues may be central to motivate them to critically analyse their own perspectives, which, in turn, may enable their pupils to explore their identities in the context of societal divisions, their viewpoints on controversial issues and their role within society today and in the future.

It was therefore the aim of this article to investigate in what ways teachers' understandings of citizenship education in a divided society reflect discourses around national citizenship and controversial issues in the context of Northern Ireland. It is argued that while the controversial nature of sectarianism and past conflict maintains its sensitivity in the educational context, other categories of potential exclusion, such as race and sexuality, may compete for space in educational discourse and teaching. While the recognition of not only teachers' own backgrounds but also hegemonic beliefs within society is used by some teachers as an opportunity for role modelling citizenship, complex interlinkages between traditionally highlighted and alternative categories of exclusion and societal conflict are rarely explored. This appears to render teachers' understandings of citizenship and societal conflict disconnected, which in turn may hamper the potential for citizenship education to address societal divisions and to promote active peace in the long term.

## Setting

When exploring citizenship education in the context of societal divisions, Northern Ireland provides a particularly pertinent case study. Northern Ireland has a long history of political conflict, involving those who want the jurisdiction to be united with the Republic of Ireland (of whom the majority are Catholic) and those who wish it to remain part of the UK (of whom the majority are Protestants). Since the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and the establishment of a devolved government in 1998, Northern Ireland is sometimes considered a post-conflict society. However, today it is a society still heavily segregated with regards to its political institutions (McGarry and O'Leary 2004) as well as housing,

interpersonal relationships and education (Hewstone *et al.* 2005, Mesev *et al.* 2008, Niens and Cairns 2008). While most pupils attend controlled (majority Protestant) or maintained (majority Catholic) primary and post-primary schools, only about 5% of pupils are enrolled in integrated schools, which aim for approximately equal representation of Catholic and Protestant pupils (Department of Education 2011). Additionally, increasing immigration means that school populations reflect the complex cultural patterns that characterise society as a whole and education faces challenges not only in relation to sectarianism but also racism. Based on research indicating the need for a wider understanding of cultural diversity beyond traditional divisions and the promotion of democratic skills (Smith and Robinson 1996) and building on previous curricular initiatives in Northern Ireland and current ones in the Republic of Ireland and Great Britain, citizenship education in Northern Ireland focuses on the development of a culture of tolerance that is participatory, inclusive to all and based on human rights (Arlow 2004). The citizenship curriculum aims to acknowledge the particularities of Northern Ireland's society as well as to recognise globalisation though there is a notable absence of the (disputed) national dimension. Local & Global Citizenship in post-primary education addresses four key concepts: diversity and inclusion, equality and social justice, democracy and active participation, and human rights and social responsibility, the latter being described as the 'value base' for the programme (Kerr *et al.* 2002).

In recent years, there have been increasing calls for an emphasis on values and critical reflection in teacher education (Smith *et al.* 2008), not least in recognition of the challenges that teachers face when teaching controversial issues in the context of divided societies (McCully 2006). Donnelly (2004, p. 263) argues that 'if teachers are not accorded the time and space to develop a critical understanding of their own values and beliefs then there is the potential for schools to simply reinforce the psychological barriers which sustain division'. However, while post-primary pupils appear to be interested in human rights, current affairs and the conflict in Northern Ireland (Niens *et al.* 2006), teachers are often more reluctant to deal with these issues in the context of the classroom (Donnelly and Hughes 2006).

Previous educational initiatives to promote community relations in Northern Ireland have been criticised for a lack of appropriate training to prepare teachers for teaching controversial issues (Elwood *et al.* 2004). As a consequence, in-service teacher training in citizenship education has been well resourced in Northern Ireland and the local education authorities (Education and Library Boards, ELBs) offered an opt-in seven-day training course for up to five teachers from all post-primary schools over a four-year period ending in 2006.

As such, the Northern Ireland educational context provided an opportunity to explore not only how teachers understood citizenship education and the teaching of controversial issues as part of it, but also how this understanding developed through relevant training and implementation of the curriculum in the classroom. To this purpose, teacher interviews were analysed, which formed part of the longitudinal evaluation of Local & Global Citizenship (CCEA 2006. University of Ulster, 2008) and which were conducted over the course of the in-service training programme.

## Methodology

### Sample

In 2005/2006, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 teachers (of whom two were male) at the beginning and end of a six-month training programme in Local & Global

Citizenship, which was provided by the local ELBs. As this was part of a larger-scale evaluation, the baseline and follow-up interviews were designed to provide an insight into teachers' developing understanding of citizenship education as a result of the training and their experience of implementing citizenship education into the classroom. Two to four teachers from each of the five ELBs participated in the research.

### ***Procedure***

While the interview schedules focused on teachers' motivations to become involved in citizenship education, their understandings of citizenship education, teaching methods and the expected outcomes of the subject on pupils, schools and society as a whole, for the purposes of this article, will focus on their motivation to teach citizenship and their understandings only.

Interviewees were informed that their participation in the research was voluntary and confidential. Interviews took 15–45 minutes and were conducted before or after the training courses. Interviews were audiotaped after agreement from the participants was obtained and were subsequently transcribed and analysed thematically. To increase the reliability of results, two researchers analysed the data independently. Where there was divergence between the two analyses, discussion between the researchers continued until resolution was achieved.

### **Results**

Data were initially analysed to provide a full description of the entire data set for the purpose of the evaluation, resulting in six themes (teacher background and motivation; understandings of Local & Global Citizenship; perceived subject overlap; teaching methods, including active methods, ability levels, controversial issues and resources; school community, potential impact of citizenship education). For the purpose of this article, we will present a 'more detailed and nuanced account' of some of these themes (Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 83). Results are therefore presented by first providing a brief account of teachers' background and motivation to teach citizenship to contextualise their responses, and second focusing on two themes, understandings of Local & Global Citizenship, with a focus on national identity, and controversial issues, which are further differentiated into three subthemes:

1. School contexts, teachers' background and motivation to teach citizenship;
2. Understandings of Local & Global Citizenship: Nationality, the exploration of diverse identities and perspective taking;
3. Controversial issues:
  - Sectarianism
  - Racism
  - Homosexuality.

#### ***School contexts, teachers' background and motivation to teach citizenship***

Teachers came from post-primary schools across Northern Ireland, representing both urban ( $n = 7$ ) and rural ( $n = 6$ ) settings. While most of the schools were co-educational ( $N = 11$ ), two teachers were based in boys' schools. Four interviewees taught at secondary maintained schools, four taught at secondary controlled schools, one interviewee taught at

a controlled grammar, one at a maintained grammar school and one interviewee was based at an integrated school. Of the 13 teachers interviewed, 11 were female and two were male.

Participants' professional experience varied substantially with some teachers having just completed their Post Graduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) and others with up to 26 years of teaching experience. Similarly, they represented a broad range of subject areas, including English, geography, history, languages, information and communications technology and business studies, religious education, and technology and design. However, history was the most commonly taught subject area amongst these teachers, with seven of them identifying it as one of their main subject areas. Two interviewees had enrolled for citizenship as a subsidiary subject during their PGCE course and a few teachers already taught citizenship to pupils in key stage 3 or 4 as part of their schools' citizenship pilot schemes. Some teachers attended the in-service development programme with several staff members from their school; others were the sole representatives from their respective schools. Even though some teachers were nominated by their school without any prior interest in the subject area, most reported that they had volunteered or agreed readily when asked to attend the in-service development programme. Many teachers reported an interest and enthusiasm for citizenship and a commitment to contribute to pupils' learning, the life of the school and wider society. Some had previous experience with similar educational programmes, such as Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU) and other community relations initiatives. Others cited broader professional reasons, including overlap with individual subject areas, the potential to enhance career opportunities, ongoing personal and professional development, and social commitment. Most of the interviewees described themselves as active in their communities and involved in a variety of organisations, including sports clubs, drama societies, cross-community organisations, fundraising for specific charities and the church though these were mainly school-based.

### *Understandings of Local & Global Citizenship: nationality, the exploration of diverse identities and perspective taking*

At the time of the baseline interviews, interviewees' understandings of citizenship education varied substantially. Whilst most interviewees were able to offer a generic definition of citizenship education, many were less articulate in identifying core elements. The individual's role in and contribution to society was commonly stated:

I would say it's to do with being a good citizen, a good member of society and also... to be an active member of society. So, I guess the way I explain it to the children is having viewpoints and being able to stand up for it, but also to be able to understand other people's point of view as well.

Follow-up interviews did not reveal major changes in the interpretation of citizenship but interviewees' understandings had become notably more developed, there was less variation between individual teachers relating to concepts associated with citizenship, which were now conceptualised more definitely around the key concepts of Local & Global Citizenship.

The absence of an explicit national context in the curriculum resulted in some diffuse interpretations, indicating limited awareness and debate of this issue. The confusion relating to the meaning of the national context is clearly highlighted in the following comment:

Obviously then there is local citizenship which involves your neighbours, people in school, parents and so on. And national would be just something as trivial as protecting the environment, em, not throwing your litter around the school. Global, then, is on a wider base – having respect for different cultures, different religions, and using an example of perhaps a foreign student coming into a classroom – how would you respect them?



The national context is thus not only 'trivialised' but represents a conglomeration of the immediate, local environment (school) and a wider, global context (environmental impact that reaches beyond national boundaries). National identity (British, Irish or otherwise) then remains dissociated from citizenship as a particular state (Ireland or Great Britain) or vision (e.g. independent state) and thereby diffuse and undefined. Smith (2003) highlights the problematic nature of citizenship education in Northern Ireland as a society where national identity and the state itself are contested and suggests an enquiry-based approach to the subject to allow the development of constructive discourse and debate on such issues. However, the absence of the national context within Local & Global Citizenship appears to be mirrored in interviewees' conceptualisations of citizenship education, which suggests that previously recognized limitations to curricular initiatives to promote peace (Smith and Robinson 1996) may reoccur in Local & Global Citizenship.

The importance of incorporating emotional aspects and perspective taking into teaching issues related to national identity in Local & Global Citizenship was highlighted by several teachers: 'So, I think, empathy to me is the biggest key'. Salomon (2004) suggests that empathy is an essential component of peace education. Similarly, Bar-Tal *et al.* (2010) differentiate between cognitive and affective aspects of empathy and suggest perspective taking as one of the 'most promising routes for promoting empathy'. This view was shared by many participants in this study who emphasised the importance of perspective taking and empathy, which were seen as essentials for pupils to learn respect for diversity and shared values, especially in the context of homogenous classrooms and home environments. There was also an acknowledgement of the inherent limitations of teaching empathy in single identity settings as one teacher explained: 'You try to teach what they call the other side, but you are very aware that you can't because you are not from that community and you're bringing your own baggage with you. But the first stage to being what I call a good citizen of Northern Ireland in a divided community is recognising where you come from, yes, being proud of it, but realising there are limitations on where you're coming from. And if you do that, then you start to try and understand and reach out to the other community'. Given the role of emotions in resolving conflict, promoting reconciliation and establishing peaceful community relations (Paterson 2000, Tam *et al.* 2007), teachers' recognition of the centrality of emotions and perspective taking and its limitations due to their own situated identities seems to be a promising starting point for teaching citizenship in divided societies.

### ***Controversial issues: sectarianism***

Most interviewees appeared to put equal emphasis on Local & Global Citizenship and while discussions about sectarianism and the history of conflict in Northern Ireland still tended to be avoided through a more general focus on poverty or homelessness, this was not always the case. Referring to a balance of local and global issues, one participant explained:

I find myself that even in the classroom it all comes back to Northern Ireland, and if you're looking at diversity it's always Catholic and Protestant. We do ... it's hard to say a 50–50 split between the two, but I think that they have to understand the differences in their own society and then branch from there, so perhaps a 60–40 split.

In this case, the teacher clearly saw sectarian divisions as a focal point for enabling pupils to understand citizenship not only at a local but also at a global level. In the baseline interviews, a few teachers stated that they never had to deal with controversial issues relating to the Northern Ireland conflict, which they explained by non-sectarian attitudes of



their pupils or by the fact that no comments were made to them directly ‘nothing is ever really directly been said to me about somebody else for me to have to deal with as such’. This may indicate an underestimation of underlying sectarian attitudes amongst pupils as well as a tendency not to address such topics unless it is seen as a behavioural issue disrupting relationships within the school. Others suggested that it may be a new and unique experience for pupils to explore such issues:

And probably the first time in their educational career – at 14 years of age – it’s the first time that they’re coming in and talking about things [sectarianism] they had never been talked to about before. And they have a lot of barriers to break down in what their family backgrounds are.

Recent research highlights that parental attitudes present one of the most significant predictors of young people’s views relating to community relations in Northern Ireland (Stringer *et al.* 2010) and other societies experiencing political conflict (Bar-Tal 1996) and an awareness of potential tensions between perspectives learnt within the family and school was recognised by a number of participants.

At the time of the follow-up interviews, many interviewees indicated that they felt very confident to teach controversial issues relating to the conflict though some described it as the most difficult aspect of teaching citizenship ‘That would be the one area that I’m not so comfortable working with...’. Another teacher identified sectarianism as the most difficult aspect to address and explains ‘I think this would have been the one area which in this school anyway, it’s in the majority Protestant, they don’t really get into it that much. I, I mean I would tend to sway away from that subject’. The dominance of one community in the classroom was also regarded as a challenge by other teachers:

The problem is that you are in a school that is one 100% Nationalist/Catholic in a room, in a classroom. They are all against it [sectarianism] but yet some of them have got very sectarian ideas; so you have to challenge that ...

The comment paints an image of the teacher as a sole advocate for community relations against the backdrop of a classroom of pupils, who appear to be either actively or passively defending their community. While some were willing to promote discussion in such contexts and thereby to act as a role model active citizenship, others contextualised their reluctance to engage in discussion about sectarianism with reference to the wider school context:

The discussions are very, sometimes they get very in-depth and things they tell you that you would never have dreamt they knew or did know ... Just kids that have heard of shootings across the street from them and this sort of thing. And racial issues of some Chinese person who had been chucked out of their home. And someone who had had a bullet through their door. You know, and they all knew this. This is what they were telling me and at the age of eleven that’s quite a young age to have experienced that sort of thing.

Empirical research has shown that teachers are often reluctant to address controversial issues in the classroom in many societies (Hess 2004, Oulton *et al.* 2004, Bickmore 2007) and that different approaches are necessary to teaching it effectively in different contexts (Stradling 1984).

In this study, interviewees’ comments clearly highlight the need for tailored teaching and learning strategies as well as the skills and sensitivity required from teachers working in areas of high levels of political and social violence and the contextual influences of schools’ locations and home environments, which may influence pupils’ attitudes, behaviours and emotions. Additionally, schools’ culture and ethos relating to community relations and openness to discussions about controversial issues appear to vary

substantially and teachers suggested a distinct lack of institutional support for teaching about such issues in some schools (Donnelly and Hughes 2006, McCully 2006).

Research in Northern Ireland has highlighted teachers' insecurity about teaching controversial issues, be it because of lack of confidence in teaching it effectively or concerns about personal safety, classroom management, institutional barriers or the potential of actually reinforcing sectarian attitudes (Donnelly 2004, McCully 2006, King 2009).

### *Controversial issues: racism*

In baseline interviews, references to racism were often general and embedded in lists of important issues to be addressed in citizenship education. 'All that ... religion, racism ... it's all issues that need to be looked at'. While interviewees often linked racism and sectarianism in their conversations, many saw racism as the issue that was easier to tackle than conflict-related sectarianism. One teacher explained in the follow-up interview: 'Hm, well yeah, I would tend to find the sectarianism thing harder to teach than racism. Probably because it's more of an issue in Northern Ireland in general than racism is'. Despite reported increases in racist incidents across Northern Ireland (Jarman 2005), this sense of racism being less controversial appeared to be based on the understanding that sectarianism had impacted almost everybody in society, while only a minority was affected by racism.

Follow-up interviews provided more of an insight into how teachers tackled issues relating to racism in their classrooms. To explain the significance of everyday prejudice, one teacher used 'extreme' cases of racism (e.g. the holocaust) though he acknowledged that some pupils found it difficult to link it to their own views:

So you kind of go for the big shock and then get them to look at their own views. (...) But then they will never make the link: Why are you naming that person such and such? Is that not what the Nazis did to the Jews? You know, some of them do get the link but a lot of them don't.

Another interviewee reported to use sympathy as a tool to engage pupils with the issue of racism but echoed a similar pessimism about the potential for teaching to change deeply engrained attitudes, which once again were seen as enforced through the home environment:

If I'm discussing, for example, the case of young Emmett Till, who is a young boy in Chicago who was killed because of his colour. (...) Children have a great capacity to be sympathetic; so if you can push all the right buttons, you deal with that first of all. But deep down, there is still this wedge that comes from maybe living in a house where it's okay to make a racist comment or it's okay to laugh at people or they're reading the most awful newspaper; so they [the pupils] are obviously getting this absorbed in their daily life. So you're up against quite a lot but you have to make a stand.

The teacher's dedication to making 'a stand' against racism despite the odds may be seen as role modelling citizenship in practice as suggested by Leenders *et al.* (2008). The substantial influence of the home and the local community on pupils' attitudes was frequently juxtaposed against the limited influence of the school and, despite the interviewees' realism about the potential impact of education, they remained clearly committed to the teaching of tolerance relating to ethnic minority members. In recent years, Belfast has sometimes been termed the 'race hate capital of Europe' due to increasing numbers of racist incidents reported to the police (Jarman 2005). While in public discourse the emphasis has been mainly on racist violence and its victims whereby the significance of institutional violence is often neglected, research has been criticised for

focusing too much on institutional racism with little attention paid to the predictors of racist attitudes and behaviours at individual level (Knox 2011). Knox (2011) argues that individuals' racist attitudes are influenced and shaped by sectarianism in Northern Ireland and partly due to understandings of economic insecurity, insufficient policies aimed to promote 'good relations' and patterns of residential housing.

Participants disagreed about the extent to which the presence of pupils from ethnic minority group backgrounds facilitates citizenship teaching and learning. One interviewee described the difficulties in not offending ethnic minority group members when discussing racism in the classroom:

Maybe if you are discussing racism, things like that, and maybe you have, you know, a Chinese person, a Polish person, somebody else in the classroom, because you don't want somebody to, you know, shout out something abusive that's going to hurt their feelings, and how are you going to handle it, you know, there is going to be a lot of issues that are going to arise and you can't really tell what's going to happen until it happens.

Another interviewee highlighted the contribution that pupils from minority backgrounds can make and indicated that it was easier to address racism if there was a small group of pupils from minority backgrounds rather than a single child: 'So, at least there is a couple [of pupils from minority backgrounds] there and they give their perspective on things.'

Referring to ethnic minority members, one interviewee queried the exploration of local history and its implications for these pupils:

An awful lot of the symbols [religious, political and social relating to the Catholic and Protestant community] didn't mean anything to them. And then we were talking about what was acceptable to say and sectarianism, and again, I was very conscious that this means absolutely nothing to the people coming in and I began to think that was something that I would like to have spent more time on.

This comment clearly highlights the intertwined nature of categories of exclusion in the context of conflict societies and the realities of classroom practice, where teachers may be struggling to find the time and space to explore the complexity of relationships without excluding students from ethnic minority backgrounds due to reliance on assumed shared understanding of issues.

### ***Controversial issues: homosexuality***

Evidence for this particular theme was scant and what was absent in teachers' conversations was almost more noteworthy than what was said. While references to controversial issues frequently dealt with sectarianism and racism, homophobia was mentioned by only two interviewees. However, both of these interviewees suggested that homophobia was the most controversial and most difficult topic to teach and that they faced rigid barriers when trying to address it in the classroom, not only due to negative attitudes from pupils and parents but also teaching staff and senior management within the schools. One teacher explained that many pupils and parents had high levels of prejudices against homosexuals and that they would resist any attempt to talk about it as they felt it compromised their beliefs and identity: 'It's amazing how many people just cannot even discuss it [homophobia], because even to discuss it kindly, in their terms means that they are obviously gay'. This comment reflects the notion of the social construction of gender identity based on a hegemonic belief in heterosexuality. Kimmel (2007) suggests that in many societies the construction of masculine identity is based on its juxtaposition to femininity and homosexuality and that silence may be a response to the fear of being identified as not sufficiently masculine in a male-dominated society. Another interviewee

highlighted suspicion from colleagues and senior management as a barrier to teaching this topic and recalled that he had been prevented by the school's Board of Governors from disseminating a booklet devised by the Citizenship Foundation because of references to homosexuality and consequently felt that this was 'the only area I would [see] myself drawing back on'.

Research highlights the complexity of the impact of sectarian divisions on members of the Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual (LGB) community throughout the troubles and the ongoing peace process, where members of sexual minority orientations negotiated their solidarity with others in the LGB community across sectarian boundaries with necessary adherence to the codes of practice in their own sectarian neighbourhoods (Radford *et al.* 2006). In the past 10 years, homophobic bullying has been identified as a major problem in Northern Ireland. Jarman and Tennant (2003) highlight the high prevalence of homophobic harassment in Northern Ireland and in a cross-cultural comparative study of bigotry towards specific ethnic, religious, and sexual groups, Borooah and Mangan (2007) found high levels of prejudice in Northern Ireland in general whereby homophobia was most widely prevalent. Exploring the relationship between same sex attraction, experiences of homophobic bullying and mental health amongst young people in Northern Ireland, McNamee *et al.* (2008) found that young people who stated they have been attracted to same sex partners in the past also reported significantly more experiences of bullying in school, perceived schools to be less supportive in the face of bullying and scored lower with regards to their mental health. As such, it is clearly important that schools and teachers address this issue; however, Livesey *et al.* (2007) found that only a minority of schools participating in their study about bullying had policies in place which directly target homophobic bullying. While Local and Global Citizenship could offer a space to discuss and challenge homophobia, most teachers either did not seem to see it as an important issue to raise in the interview or viewed it as particularly difficult. Similarly, issues relating to gender and social class remained unexplored in teachers' understandings of citizenship. Lister (2008) highlights the often-exclusive focus on socio-cultural groups in discourses around citizenship education and the importance of incorporating dimensions of social class and gender for an inclusive and effective approach to citizenship education.

## Conclusion

In summary, the present research explored teachers' developing understanding of citizenship education and the role of controversial issues in the context of Northern Ireland as a society emerging from a history of political conflict.

The small-scale and self-selected sample means that results should not be generalized. Additionally, the self-reported nature of the interview data may have impacted the way respondents portrayed themselves and as such it cannot be assessed how their understandings would translate into the classroom. However, the findings do indicate how teachers' views of citizenship education develop and selectively correspond or conflict with educational discourses, policy and training. As such they highlight some issues that may be useful for practitioners, academics and policy-makers to understand the challenges of teaching citizenship in the context of divided societies.

Over the course of the citizenship training, interviewees generally developed a more detailed understanding of citizenship education, which reflected the theoretical discourses of the concept. Similar to research elsewhere, there was no evidence that teachers attempted

to influence pupils when discussing controversial issue though whether or not such issues were identified for inclusion illustrated their sensitivity (Hess 2008).

However, confused interpretations of national citizenship also indicated how societal and curricular ambiguities may be transmitted to teachers' understandings and practices, and potentially in turn to pupils. The absence of a shared vision of national identity evident in the curriculum and wider societal discourse (McEvoy 2007, Niens and Chastenay 2008) may thus impede the promotion of 'positive peace'. Leonard (2007, p. 498) cautions that national identity may be transmitted through 'what is not said rather than what is discussed' and this may be particularly true given the influence of community and family perspectives on young people's sense of identity, community and their role in society (Muldoon *et al.* 2007, Stringer *et al.* 2010).

Davies (2005) proposes that to develop students' sense of 'positive peace', defined as more than just the absence of war 'to include issues of justice, poverty and freedom' (Reardon 1997, p. 22), they should be actively challenged in their attitudes through the discussion of controversial issues and provided with experiential learning opportunities. While there was some evidence of such teaching emerging from the interviews, they also indicated a tendency to avoid controversial issues, not only in relation to traditional community divisions but also with regards to other marginalized groups. Teachers, thus, differed considerably in relation to their willingness to address different types of controversial issues and their approaches to teaching these in the classroom, which appeared to be due to contextual factors and perceptions of personal capability. While some teachers still viewed sectarianism and the political conflict in Northern Ireland as a difficult issue to teach, others used it as a springboard to broach more distanced issues of equality. Furthermore, while the highly sensitive nature of sectarianism, and to a lesser extent racism, was voiced by all participants, lack of references relating to sexuality as well as other categories of exclusion, such as gender and social class, characterised most interviews indicating unacknowledged inequalities, conformation with hegemonic beliefs and what Giroux (1984) terms 'structured silences'. In the context of Northern Ireland, Ashe (2009) argues that sexual inequality is an integral feature of conflict transformation, which is all too frequently overlooked in public debates and within education. It has thus been proposed that the intertwined nature of racism, sectarianism, homophobia and other forms of prejudice requires an inclusive approach to reconciliation, which has clearly been recognised in some of the policies introduced since the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement though they may not be sufficient in their implementation in practice (Hughes 2008). While the revised Northern Ireland curriculum pays cognisance to these overlapping categories of exclusion, there is little indication of their interrelatedness.

The revised Northern Ireland curriculum offers teachers the space to identify topics that are of particular importance to their own school contexts, which ensures that teaching is relevant for pupils. However, this choice may also mean that issues most controversial in their contexts may not be covered or delivered in a way that precludes critical discussion. Based on a study of teachers' representations of conflict in the Canadian education context, Bickmore (2006, p. 381) suggests that flexibility in the curriculum may provide the opportunity for teachers to use traditional or transformative teaching approaches, whereby their decision will be 'constrained and shaped by some of the same discursive patterns that have shaped these curriculum guidelines'. Reciprocal relationships between societal discourse, curriculum and teachers' perspectives were similarly reflected in this study. Categories of exclusion, such as race and sexuality, may compete with sectarian community divisions for space in educational discourse and teaching. While some teachers identified hegemonic beliefs prevalent in their school contexts and

communities and attempted to challenge these, thereby role-modelling citizenship in practice for their students, for most teachers the complex interlinkages between sectarian and other categories of exclusion in the context societal divisions today and in the past remain unacknowledged and unexplored. For example, the differential impact of the conflict on people with different sexual orientation, on people from outside of Northern Ireland, etc. remained elusive in teachers' understandings of citizenship. Sectarian societal divisions were thereby disconnected from other controversial issues, which in turn may render the concept of citizenship exclusive and hamper the potential for citizenship education to address societal divisions and conflict and to promote active peace in the long term.

In fact, effective conflict transformation and the promotion of positive peace through active citizenship education needs to acknowledge the contribution of all social groups and communities to societal divisions and violence as well as peace. Only if linkages between categories of exclusion are acknowledged and explored through classroom discussions for times of conflict and of peace can citizenship education contribute to the development of an inclusive discourse around history and society and thereby to promote sustainable peace.

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